

At the English Expo on April 5, 2014, I won second place in the Senior Division for Short Story Fantasy with this story. It was an unexpected turn of events for me: I only entered that contest at all because I swapped my original schedule with an absent student's schedule at the last second, I picked what I considered to be risky themes to write about, and the final length of the story seemed far shorter than that of my fellow participants'. I ran with the first mental image I had in response to one of the five prompts, and felt very nervous when the story was done after only about 30 minutes. Even after reviewing what I wrote for mistakes, I was still the first one out the door. I honestly didn't expect to win anything! It was a surprising and great feeling to hear my name and school called during the award ceremony.

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### Demon's Downfall for Death

"I CAN'T!" she screamed, clawing at her face helplessly. Pure agony rocked her very soul. She *couldn't*.

"Sherry," came the voice beneath layers of gunk, calmly as if there wasn't anything wrong at all. "It's the only way to stop the demon. Do it." Why was she being so stubborn? Sherry couldn't do it, she thought that was clear at this point. She *couldn't*.

"Alicia," she sobbed. "You told me there was going to be another way. You *promised!*"

"I know. I'm sorry." Alicia's voice cracked, and tears flooded down Sherry's face in renewed strength.

"But my life isn't worth killing thousands of people."

Sherry shook, both from despair and a sudden pang of fury. "IT IS TO ME!" There was silence for a moment before she screamed again. "I LOVE YOU, DAMMIT!"

More shaky sobs erupted from Sherry, who clutched her arms like that might pull her out of this horror show and back to the old days of laughter and sunshine. It just wasn't /fair/. Why should Alicia's death specifically be the thing that shattered the demon's life force? Sherry would rather it have been *anyone else's*, even her own.

In the back of her mind she realized this was an awful time for a love confession. It just made things harder. But it was the last card she had left to convince Alicia not to sacrifice her life. Even if there *weren't* any other options.

"Sherry..." Her voice was so unsteady and tearful that Sherry fell onto the ground, howling in misery and shame.

Rumbles echoed throughout the cave, and rubble rained down on Sherry's blonde curls.

"Please, Sherry," Alicia whispered. "If you really do love me, give me this one last favor. Please..."

This was manipulation in its truest form, and sobs continued to wrack through Sherry's body. From somewhere she gathered the energy to rise from the dirt and stare blurrily at the gunk-covered figure. She couldn't do this. But as more quakes shook the cave,

and faint screams reached her ears, she knew she had to. She would never forgive herself for this.

Sherry stepped in close to her friend and tightly grabbed her in her arms. Ignoring the revolting muck, she leaned in and kissed where Alicia's lips should be located, deciding that she at least deserved that before being sacrificed.

"I'm so sorry..."

Sherry took a step back and lit the match. She deliberately tossed it onto the flammable gunk and went numb when she heard the first screams.